

ON TRANSLATION
Conference on Literary Translation and Culture (Brussels, 20 April, 2009)
BACKGROUND PAPER

I Introduction

Long before Europe became an economic and political project with the establishment of the European Communities, there was the recognition that the wealth of languages, laws, local and national institutions that could be observed on the continent rested upon a substantial unity at a deeper level. It is this realization that explains why, even amid the upheaval caused by revolutions, wars and ensuing processes of restoration, Edmund Burke could state at the turn of the 18th century that “a European could not feel truly in exile anywhere in Europe”. At the time, this feeling of belonging in Europe was the preserve of cultural élites and stemmed from the precious yet fragile network of cultural exchanges and mutual acquaintance slowly built over the centuries. Gradually, with the spread of literacy, the development of the publishing industry and, later, of the modern media, these networks of cultural exchanges have become accessible to the vast majority of Europeans. These exchanges have been the necessary condition for the coming into being of the very idea of Europe; their existence and consolidation remain conditions for the maturing of the idea of Europe to this day.

Literary translation is central to these historical processes, for it allows Europeans to overcome linguistic and cultural boundaries and get acquainted with the works and traditions of their neighbours.¹ Translation strengthens a sense of common European identity founded on cultural diversity. Among the many modes of inter-cultural communication, translation helps preserve Europe’s cultural diversity better than most.

In the past few decades, translation has grown in importance thanks to another factor as well: the multilingual nature of the European project. EU multilingual policies include the promotion of language learning. However, given Europe's cultural and linguistic diversity, achieving a truly multilingual Europe also means bringing citizens in contact with ideas that circulate in cultures and languages they are not familiar with. The traditional role of the translator as builder of bridges for ideas, visions, and interpretations between cultures takes a new meaning. In our united Europe, translators expand our *common* cultural horizon and enrich it with norms, values, and new forms of dialogue.

A conference on literary translation and culture

Translation is a crucial component in the communication process and in the transfer of knowledge. Depending on the content of the communication act or the specific field of knowledge that is primarily concerned (for instance science, economics, or law) translation can undoubtedly be approached from different angles. However, here we will focus essentially on the creative dimension of translation, and in particular on literary translation, which for the purposes of the present document will comprise any translated work of literature or poetry involving intellectual creation, according to the definition provided by the Berne Convention for the protection of literary and artistic works.²

¹ Roger Ellis (ed.). 2008. *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English: Volume 1: To 1550*. London: Oxford University Press.

² http://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/berne/trtdocs_wo001.html

This paper is a background document for the conference on literary translation that the European Commission calls in Brussels on April 20th, 2009. In it, translation will be discussed under different respects, such as its role in the promotion of mutual understanding and dialogue between cultures, the extent to which it can act as an intellectual bridge between languages and cultures, and the point of view of practitioners in several fields. The conference will gather writers, translators, publishers, academics, journalists and other professionals in the cultural sector. The ambitious aim is launching a Europe-wide debate on the importance of literary translation as a tool of integration and communication between Europe's cultures, and as a sizeable industry. Some sections below close with questions which are meant to invite conference participants to express their views.

II Translation

Europe has always spoken through translation, and today translation is more than ever an active process, transforming what it works on, creating something new, reinventing literature and keeping it alive. The translator is a necessary cultural mediator at a time when cultures and languages become increasingly inter-dependent. In addition, translation is a lively and growing industry. In publishing and other sectors, the demand for translation is rising. The output of traditional and newer professions linked to translation is significant and poised to grow. The profession is correspondingly diversifying beyond the book industry to cover areas such as stage translation (eg, theatre, opera), screen translation (cinema, TV, new digital media), etc. Still, books remain the fundamental support of literature and the most courageous choices are often made by small and independent publishers who have to face considerable challenges when they decide to privilege quality in a market where larger publishing and media companies enjoy sizable comparative advantages in terms of global reach and economies of scale. Translations into and from less used languages are at a particular disadvantage.

1. Translation for inter-cultural dialogue

Translation is an important instrument of intercultural dialogue. The cultures of Europe as we know them today have resulted from a relentless process of translation thanks to which insights and practices have spread from individual communities to the rest of the continent. If cultures are co-operative epistemic quests, then translation helped forge a unified European culture over the centuries. In other words, this dialogue between cultures has produced the common cultural ground that we now share. This permanent communication has also influenced Europe's languages, making them receptive to foreign words and concepts. The history of European literature shows that the borders between languages and cultures are porous. Taking advantage of translated works, thinkers, philosophers, writers and political leaders have carried on a pan-European debate in which many of the ideas that have shaped the world were hatched.

This ongoing dialogue is not just a synchronic one: nowadays as in the past, the availability of translations of European classics – including Latin and Greek ones - allows a contemporary reader to appreciate the full extent of our common heritage. In this sense, translation provides European culture with an added value which is in keeping with its most defining historical characteristics. Moreover, by making more texts available and accessible, translations

stimulate reading, contribute to the development of abstract reasoning and encourage creativity: essential competences in any field of knowledge. However, by their own nature translations of literary texts also face specific challenges: translations grow old. Cultural references change in time, together with the language and the readers' perception of a text. New translations are constantly needed to keep up with a changing world.

European literature has a large readership also outside Europe and attracts the interest of emerging publishing markets (such as China, India and Brasil). Concerted cultural cooperation could open new avenues for European cultural product. National cultural institutes could intensify their cooperation organizing events or taking part in fairs to promote European writers abroad. A concerted effort by European publishers could boost exports and provide indirect support to the translation industry. Promoting the circulation of European works around the globe would also strengthen Europe's public diplomacy and improve relations with EU partners, starting from and the other countries included in the European Neighbourhood Policy and in particular the Euro–Mediterranean area, which is characterised by rich cultural diversity and deep common cultural roots, but also by ancient as well as more recent fracture lines and reciprocal misunderstandings³.

Questions:

1. How can the role of translation in inter-cultural dialogue be defined?
2. What is the relationship between translation and multilingualism?
3. What is the relationships between translation and the literary tradition?
3. What role could translation play in the external dimension of the EU?

2. The notion of translation

With the establishment of the academic field known as Translation Studies over the past 30 years or so, ideas about translation have evolved very fast, even though older notions, long discarded by translation scholars, can still be prevalent among laymen. Before the emergence of Translation Studies as an identifiable academic field, Western theories of translation had revolved around a few simple conceptions for many centuries,⁴ basically resting upon the assumption that translating implies little more than the transposition of words from one language into another⁵.

³ See the Conclusions agreed by the Ministers of Culture at the Euro-Med conference in Athens May 29_30, 2008, where the role of translation for the dialogue between cultures in the Mediterranean area is highlighted. http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/docs/culture_concl_0508_en.pdf

⁴ The earliest extant reflection on translation is widely regarded to be a text by Cicero of ca. 44 BC, a short preface to his translation of two Greek speeches. Commenting on his own work, Cicero stated he had not re-written his speeches word for word as a translator would have done; he had chosen to write as an orator instead: he did not count the words, rather he weighed them. *Converti enim ex Atticis duorum eloquentissimorum nobilissimas orationes inter seque contrarias, Aeschinis et Demosthenis; nec converti ut interpres, sed ut orator, sententiis isdem et earum formis tamquam figuris, verbis ad nostram consuetudinem aptis. In quibus non verbum pro verbo necesse habui reddere, sed genus omne verborum vimque servavi. Non enim ea me adnumerare lectori putavi oportere, sed tamquam appendere* (Cicero. *De optimo genere oratorum* V.14).

⁵ JC Catford, for instance, wrote as late as 1965: "Translation may be defined as follows: the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent material in another language (TL)" (Catford, John

If translating is not about the ‘replacement of textual material’, what is it? Modern theories regard translation—especially literary translation—as more akin to a performing art. Like theatre and music, it requires talent, knowledge and skills that are specific to it. Like musicians, literary translators are called to interpret, negotiate and re-enact a work of art according to certain criteria. The original, its reception in the source environment, and any other relevant contextual information are the material translators use to bring a new work to light, which will then circulate in a new linguistic and cultural environment. Contemporary views of translating regard the relationship between a given original and its translations not as pre-existing and mechanical, but rather as construed and defined by the very act of translating. Translators use their special skills to interpret the work to be translated, negotiate the differences between the source and target environments, and choose the solution that would lead to the best ‘performance’ in the target environment among all possible alternatives. To do so, translators sometimes introduce novel elements in the target environment. Because translating is not a mechanical operation of substitution, its result will vary from one translator to another, according to their reading, approach and perception of the original. In addition, translation is a cultural construct that changes over time and space; a variability that affects the most basic concepts, including what counts as translation and what does not. For instance, Geoffrey Chaucer was using a concept of translation with his continental sources that would probably expose him to a copyright suit in our age.

3. The market for translations

The proportion of translated literature over the total of literary titles published in a language varies strongly from one market to another. There are markets that translate much more than others. This has obvious influence on translators' revenues, but also on the diffusion of literary works and on the image readers can form of foreign cultures and communities. These trends have implications also in the more general perspective of the European integration process.

Available data in the publishing sector show a clear growth for literary translation. Even though there is a marked unevenness, translation is a flourishing business in most countries and is important for the book industry. In 1979 the UNESCO Index Translationum counted a total of 48 132 translated books for the whole of Europe. In 2004 this amount increased to 73 791. Lesser-used languages post a steady growth over the same period.⁶

As for the main source languages, the Diversity Report 2008 survey published by the Verein für kulturelle transfers⁷, confirms the strong predominance of English as a source language, which rose steadily from 40% to over 60% on average over 25 years and reached a ceiling of around 60% in the mid 1990s. English was followed at a distance by strong positions of German and French, while Russian was in decline.

Cunnison. 1965. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation. An Essay in Applied Linguistics*. London: Oxford University Press.: 20. SL=source language; TL=target language).

⁶ <http://databases.unesco.org/xtrans/stat/xTransList.a>. The Index Translationum indicates the number of books translated per year from any languages in a given country.

⁷ Diversity Report 2008. An overview and analysis of translation statistics across Europe: Facts, trends, patterns. By Rüdiger Wischenbart with research by Jennifer Jursitzky and Sabina Muriale. Presented at the "On Translation" conference, Buch Wien 2008

In contrast, it is remarkable that no reliable statistics can be identified to track translations into English which, according to the same source, amount only to between 2 and 3 percent of all translations. On the other hand, as far as target languages are concerned, France appears to have recently overtaken Germany as the world's leading market for translations. However, this needs to be put in perspective, as China is catching up. China is not included in recent statistics, but according to Frankfurt Book Fair data, China bought 10,255 titles for translation in 2007. This indication shows a clear upward trend for the translation market in China. The strong position of Spain, according to UNESCO data, may need additional research for a more detailed understanding of Spain's publishing industry as the hub for Spanish-language readerships outside the country. Between 1979 and 2006, the three top languages alone (English, French and German) accounted for 78,14% of all translations. As to the next 5 languages, and over the same period, Italian fell from 3,77 to 3,46, Spanish rose from 1,46 to 2,43. Swedish and Dutch passed from 2,99 to 2,06 and from 1,28 to 1,38, respectively. Finally, Russian fell dramatically from 6,03 to 2,85.

The countries of the two latest European Union enlargements present a set of largely diverse developments in the publishing sector. According to the Verein für kulturelle transfers the fundamental trend for the 7 main languages of Central Europe (Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Slovenian, Romanian and Bulgarian) over the past quarter century has been one of dramatic decline in the 1980s, followed by a flat trend in the early 1990s and a slow but steady growth over the past decade.

Question:

1. Do we need to gather more and better aggregate data of translation activity at national and European level? Where should we start from?
2. What are the implications for the development of a European identity of the large imbalances between languages in the amount of translations?

II Translators

Literary translation is not a mere transposition of words from one language into another. Translating a literary text requires a wide array of uncommon abilities: talent and vision, skill and knowledge of the source and the target languages, cultures and traditions. Yet the work of the translators is almost invisible to the readers and their achievements difficult to appreciate, because the artistic added value a translator can put in a translated work is hardly discernible for the non specialist. In addition, translators work alone and have scarce possibilities of professional development

1. Working conditions

Within the overall framework provided by the Berne convention, and despite the 1976 UNESCO "Recommendation on the legal protection of Translators and Translations and the practical means to improve the Status of Translators"⁸, and the Charter published in 1994 by

⁸ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13089&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

the International Federation of Translators⁹, a wide array of different situations prevail in the various European countries, both legally and in terms of publishing rules and customs. It is therefore difficult to grasp in an exhaustive way the practical conditions in which most literary translators work. In addition, the sector is weakly organised, and remains rather fragmented: the majority of translators work independently and do not belong to major organisations.

As a consequence, the bargaining position of translators is weak; they are possibly the last European workers who can legally receive only piecework pay¹⁰. The invisibility of translators—which has been a current concept in translation scholarship for a long time¹¹—is nowhere more apparent than in the process that leads to the publication of a literary work. Translating often goes unnoticed and its result is difficult to assess. The artistic value translators add to the work can hardly be appreciated by the non-specialist. As a result, even publishers can find it difficult to establish a correlation between the quality of a translation and the sales of a title. Therefore, it is not unusual for publishers to regard translations simply as overhead expenses.

2. Learning to translate

Talent, creative capacity and linguistic skills alone do not make for good translators. Just as conservatories of music exist for aspiring musicians, specialised education and training are essential for aspiring translators. Besides linguistic proficiency and a familiarity with two or more cultural environments, translators need to learn how to do inter-cultural communication; because not every gifted bilingual and bi-cultural individual is *ipso facto* a good translator. A familiarity with translation scholarship helps develop the skills and sensibility required to mediate across cultural boundaries. Exposing aspiring translators to Translation Studies literature helps them step back from their practice, reflect on it and improve their performance—both during the formative years and later in the profession. Much of translation scholarship would also make students aware of what is at stake in the act of translating, of the conditions in which it takes place, and of its implications for both the source and target cultural environments. Finally, regarding translation as worthy of serious intellectual pursuit greatly improves self-respect in the trade; which is crucial in a market that is becoming increasingly competitive and professional.

Scholarly capacity—including the ability to do serious research—is the line that demarcates translators' education from training. Today many higher-education institutions offer specialized courses for translators. A document prepared by the EMT expert group after its Paris meeting of November 2008, reads: "In 2006 there were at least 285 translation 'programmes' in European higher education, leading to a bachelor's and/or a master's degree, either as a subsidiary subject in a languages, literature or linguistics programme or as part of

⁹ <http://www.fit-ift.org/en/charter.php>

¹⁰ The survey conducted by the European Council of Literary Translation Associations (CEATL) on the Comparative income of literary translators in Europe comes to the conclusion that the work income of translators does not provide them with decent revenue. Their earnings are, in many cases significantly, below the average of those in the manufacturing and services sector.

¹¹ At least since Lawrence Venuti. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.

postgraduate training”.¹² A number of other educational centres should be added, such as summer schools and apprenticeship courses. This large figure invites further investigation.

Questions:

1. What are the most likely reasons behind these large figures?
2. Has this plethora of programmes produced a corresponding improvement in the quality of education? What is the actual level of their scholarly and technical content?
3. Although the demand for translation is growing, how does this supply match demand and to which extent does it respond to market needs?

3. Translators' networks and life-long learning opportunities

In spite of the growing professionalization and integration of the translation industry, most translators still work in isolation. Even translators operating in the same market and on the same language pairs communicate only sporadically and mostly through virtual means over the internet such as translation data bases, on-line language tools and distributed lists. Notable examples of the latter are LANTRA-L (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/7110/lantra.htm>) a general list, and ITIT (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/itit/>) a list devoted to innovation in translator and interpreter training. Major international and national scholarly societies also include a good deal of information in their websites (cf <http://www.est-translationstudies.org/>; <http://www.iatis.org/>; <http://www.uottawa.ca/associations/act-cats/>; etc.). These sites and lists can provide job opportunities, contacts with colleagues from other countries, information on writers, publishers, copyrights and contracts, access to libraries, terminology and lexical assistance, professional directories and general advice.

Are translators writers? Certainly yes, but unlike other writers, translators are rarely invited to participate in festivals, round tables, etc. For instance, many residence centres devoted to literature already exist. A period of time spent in residence centres could be a form of life-long learning for literary translation professionals as well, and a crucial experience in their careers. They would provide opportunities to attend courses, meet other translators and writers, and exchange ideas and best practices. Also, the many translation programmes that are in operation across Europe could diversify their offerings and reach out towards practising translators providing life-long learning opportunities, maybe in partnership with foundations and other public or private organisations willing to financially support their initiatives. These educational and training opportunities would help practising translators update their skills and extend their education at a time of fast technological and intellectual change for the profession.

Questions:

¹² EMT. *Competences for professional translators, experts in multilingual and multimedia communication*. 2008, page 2. EMT is an expert group set up by the European Commission's Directorate General for Translation in April 2007 with the task to make proposals towards a EU-wide reference framework for European Master's in Translation. The document is available online at http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/external_relations/universities/documents/emt_competences_translators_en.pdf

1. How to extend to literary translators some of the training and networking opportunities already available to writers?
2. What partnerships would be needed to develop such lifelong learning opportunities?

III Translating

Translation is a very old profession, yet it is at the heart of the most contemporary trends in cultural exchange. The internet has already become a major avenue for the dissemination of multilingual cultural contents. Widely available electronic supports for texts, films and music have generated new demands for translations. At the same time new technologies can also improve the quality of translations and even give them more visibility. This new situation offers therefore new perspectives also to the translators.

1. New technologies for an old profession

New technologies can offer a support to literary translation in the form of databases, electronic libraries, directories, glossaries and technical dictionaries. Programs can be developed to compare different translations of the same work or to provide an on-line archive of translated works and synopsis of works to be presented to publishers. New technologies can ease the diffusion on electronic support of works too expensive to be published on paper. E-books offer new perspectives in this field and could be developed.

The internet already provides a platform for exchanges among translators, updates on practical matters, information on book fairs, directories, job opportunities and contractual advice. Specialized publications and research concerning translation, together with scientific articles or translation samples, find an effective way of diffusion on the internet. It can be expected that exchanges and cooperation through the internet will only become more important.

This trend holds out promises also for the products and literary genres that are often marginalized in the contemporary cultural marketplace. This is the case, for instance, of poetry. Despite its being possibly the oldest literary genre, the dissemination of poetry is difficult, because poetical texts require a particular attention from the reader and because, more than any other literary genre, poetry is difficult to translate. A more widespread diffusion of poetry, translated and in its original language, also in the form of songs, could make European poems more accessible to European lovers of poetry.

Questions:

- 1 Do internet platforms represent a promising way forward for the diffusion of literature in translation?
2. How else could the internet be used to the benefit of translators?

2. The internet and the localization industry

Distinct from the traditional publishing sector, a new sector nowadays represents the frontier of the translation industry. The localization movement developed in the United States, when

companies realised that translated websites attracted more customers. The localization industry is now a highly innovative business that develops strategies for enterprises wanting to operate at a global level. It consists in the translation mainly of websites, catalogues and product presentations, but such translation takes place in a wider creative process that does not concern only language. Images, music and cultural references too are subject to translation. Websites therefore require careful "internationalization", that is, allowing for all those elements that are not, strictly speaking, linguistic, but that contribute in a decisive way to the correct reception of the content in an international context. Terminology resources are of crucial importance for this kind of work.

Localization is still primarily a vehicle from English to other languages. Other European languages are more often than not "maintenance" languages for many companies: i.e., companies already have a market in Europe, and have to maintain and serve it, but the market is not one that is seen as part of a strategic plan to gain global market share. This does not mean that these languages are unimportant, but rather that they are unlikely to represent new growth areas. In contrast are "strategic" languages, i.e., those that represent new market areas with a potential for new revenue streams. Data on strategic language are scarce, because companies tend to keep strategic information quite inaccessible. But if one looks at those countries where U.S. and European businesses are trying to establish a foot-hold for consumer-oriented products and see new large markets, we can draw the following list of strategic languages: Chinese, Japanese and Spanish.

Question:

1. What could these new trends mean for the role and the profession of the translator?

3. Non-print translation

Can dubbing, subtitling and other forms of screen translation be regarded as literary translation? Certainly yes; providing the verbal content needed for the understanding of a film implies a great deal of creativity and in this the work of a translator is similar to that of a writer. Indeed, screen translation must find the right balance between verbal and non-verbal signs and operate within unusually strict technical limitations. Also, screen translations adapt to rapid technological change; for instance, many DVDs are available in several dubbed and subtitled versions.

Opera and theatre have also translated the verbal content of performances using a technique called sur-titling, thereby gaining access to a wider audience and market. New forms of translation are also appearing in other fields. Museum, exhibitions and galleries can present captions and explicatory texts in many languages either through audio devices or via local networks visitors can access through their portables and mobile phones. Translating these texts allow exhibitions to travel and reach wider audiences. These examples show that non-print translation is a highly creative form of translation and one with a large commercial potential. In addition, these forms of translation help promote the learning of foreign languages.

Questions:

1. Would a greater use of non-print translation strengthen Europe's multilingualism and cultural diversity?
2. What could an increased use of translation for the screen mean for the role and the profession of translator?
3. Would aspiring translators of non-print texts need specialised learning programmes? What would the consequences of these developments be for translation scholarship?

Conclusions

Translation—and literary translation in particular—is essential in the multilingual and multicultural society that is being built by the process of European integration. Translators remain central actors in the publishing market and in other fields. Shortcomings and obstacles upstream and downstream the act of translating often prevent adequate recognition and remuneration of the profession. Efforts should be coordinated across the territory of the EU, taking into consideration not only the translator's needs but also the business requirements of the industries in which they work. Information and best practices must be exchanged and disseminated in view of promoting the development of the profession as a vital component of Europe's cultural industries.

Innovative working methods should also be promoted, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by new technologies, new applications of translators' knowledge and skills, and new markets. Governments and public authorities should also be invited to look into the links between translation measures and integration policies.

Finally, special attention should be paid to the growing number of courses and programmes devoted to the education and training of translators and translation scholars. Future quality standards in the practice and scholarly developments ultimately depend on these higher-education institutions. If building the knowledge-based Europe of the future relies on higher education in general; these translation programmes are crucial to sustain and extend the dialogue among the many cultures and languages of our Union.

The European Commission instruments to support literary translation

The "Culture" Programme

The "Culture" programme provides financial support for the translation of literature from one European language into another. The programme is intended to help enhance the cultural area shared by Europeans through the development of cultural cooperation between artists, cultural stakeholders and cultural institutions in the countries participating in the programme with a view to encouraging the emergence of European citizenship through transnational mobility of people working in the cultural sector, transnational circulation of artistic and cultural works and products, and an intercultural dialogue.

The translation projects may be submitted by independent publishers or publishing groups from participating countries.

EU support for Literary Translation is aimed at enhancing knowledge of the literature and literary heritage of fellow Europeans by way of promoting the circulation of literary works between countries. Publishing houses can be awarded grants for translations and publication of works of fiction from one European language into another European language. Funds of between EUR 2.000 and EUR 60.000 are available, but EU support is limited to a maximum of 50% of the total eligible cost.¹³

Translations of ancient texts forming part of our literary heritage – including classic languages, such as Ancient Greek or Latin – are also eligible.

Grant applications may be made by public or private bodies with legal status. Their principal activity must be in the cultural field and their registered office must be based in one of the countries participating in the programme. They must have the financial and operational capacity needed to complete the action proposed.

Through the "Culture" programme, the European Commission has become one of the most important providers of subsidies to literary translation in Europe. With a yearly budget of 2 Mio € it has financed the translation of some 2000 books mainly from and into less widely spoken Community languages.

¹³ With an annual budget of more than EUR 2 million it has financed 856 books in the 2 years the programme has been operational, worth EUR 3,608653,98:

1. Total amount of books translated under the Culture Programme: 2007: 259; 2008: 597

2. Total amount of grants awarded to translation projects under the Culture Programme: 2007: EUR 1,314.209,98 ; 2008: EUR 2,294.444,00